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“As Good As Any Man I’ve Ever Heard: Lead Guitar, Gendered Approaches and Popular Music”.

Kate Lewis, Lecturer in Popular Music, University of Surrey

Abstract

The guitar has played an integral role in shaping the sound of popular music and has become an icon of pop culture in the twenty-first century. The electrified instrument in particular, within the context of rock music, ascribed such significations of power and masculinity upon its players that female guitarists became significantly marginalized within the field. Academic research has explored the relationship between the guitar and masculinity and has identified issues of cultural marginalization, gender-coding and performativity as reasons for the gender imbalance surrounding the instrument.

This article will further examine the construction of a variety of gendered identities surrounding the electric guitar and will also begin a (re)assessment of the approaches and practices of female electric lead guitar players. Through a brief examination of the contributions of women who can be considered integral in shaping the legacy of the instrument within popular music, as well as a contextualization of the position of contemporary female players and their approaches, this article will consider alternate modes of performance and the possibilities of specific gendered approaches to playing the instrument.

A closer study of gender significations surrounding the guitar and the relationship between instrument and performer will enhance the ability to more thoroughly conceptualize and

redefine that which has long been considered masculinised territory in popular music. Furthermore, it may also empower new approaches and perspectives for players and audiences alike.

Introduction

In an article written for the Chicago Defender newspaper in 1943, the great writer Langston Hughes detailed a performance by Memphis Minnie (1897-1973), a blues guitarist and singer who achieved significant commercial success during the 1930s and 40s. The article begins with a description of Minnie sitting atop an icebox at the 230 Club in Chicago, a captivating figure performing a blues tune on her electric guitar. Hughes describes the dichotomy of Minnie's persona, a "well dressed woman" (1943, p.14) who on the street could have been mistaken for an "old maid school teacher" (ibid.). Yet there, in that club, on that night like many others in her career, she seemingly captivated the audience with her voice, her sly sense of humour and perhaps most of all, her command of the electric guitar. The sense of power afforded to her through wielding the instrument is apparent in Langston Hughes' words; "things cry through the strings on Memphis Minnie's electric guitar, amplified to machine proportions (...) electric welders plus a rolling mill" (ibid.).

During her career, Memphis Minnie recorded over 200 songs for a number of major labels, including 'Me and My Chauffeur Blues' and 'When the Levee Breaks', blues classics which went on to be covered by bands such as Led Zeppelin and Jefferson Airplane. While Minnie was a highly skilled, diverse and intuitive player, she can also be described as somewhat of an anomaly in popular music. During her career, Memphis Minnie almost exclusively assumed the role of lead guitarist in her collaborations, initially playing a steel-bodied acoustic guitar, but quickly integrating the developing technology of the electric guitar. Her command of the instrument was noted by many of her contemporaries, including Big Bill Broonzy, who described how Minnie could "pick a guitar and sing as good as any man I've ever heard" (Riesman, 2011, p. 212).

The position of a commercially successful, female electric lead guitarist in mainstream popular music, like Memphis Minnie, is one that has been fraught with issues of marginalization and negotiations of gender. Historically, similar issues have plagued the careers of female instrumentalists in most musical genres, yet the significant gender imbalance of the mainstream popular guitar field is still apparent. A cursory examination of the gender make-up of instrumentalists within bands on the current iTunes or Billboard Hot

100 charts, or of the line-ups at this year's major pop music festivals, demonstrates this continued imbalance^[1].

The aim of this paper is to explore the musical approaches and cultural negotiations of a number of female electric lead guitarists who have achieved commercial success throughout the history of mainstream popular music. This will provide an enhanced understanding of gender negotiations faced by women in the field, in addition to contributing to the continued scholarship surrounding female instrumentalists in pop music.

Women and the Electric Guitar

In a 1978 article published in *Guitar Player* magazine, Charlotte Ackerley questioned why there were "virtually no female counterparts to Atkins [or] Clapton" (1978, p. 259), citing a "complex interaction of biological, psychological, social and cultural factors" (ibid.). While Ackerley's article somewhat contentiously considers hormonal and physiological disadvantages, she identifies sexism within the music industry, a lack of female role modelling and culturally ingrained gender-stereotypes as the primary barriers to success facing female players.

Almost twenty years later, Mavis Bayton (1997) addressed the same question, drawing on her ethnographic research of female performers in popular music in the United Kingdom. Bayton's study supports a theory that women have been historically marginalized as instrumental performers and innovators, and have often been "written out of history" (1997, p. 37). This argument is upheld by both Gayle Wald (2007) and Susan Fast (2008) in their explorations of the career of Sister Rosetta Tharpe, an influential gospel singer and guitar player whose technical skill, singular approach and influence as both a performer and a lead guitarist have been widely overlooked in the history of popular music.

However, in opposition to Ackerley's perspective, Bayton insists that "there are no physical reasons for a lack of female guitarists" (1997, p. 39) in popular music, asserting that the marginalization of women in the field stems from issues "entirely social" (ibid.) in nature. While Bayton astutely identifies a number of social constructs which have impeded the commercial success of women as performers on the instrument, she implicates the electric guitar as the main cause, stating that the "arrival of the electric guitar led to the exclusion of women" (ibid., p. 38) due to its symbolic connotations of "phallic power" (ibid., p. 43) and strong associations with technology, which itself has been "categorised as masculine" (ibid.,

p. 42). During the nineteenth century, the guitar was considered an acceptable instrument for middle-class women, and as Ellen Koskoff states, was "deemed proper for domestic female entertainment as [it] required no facial exertions or body movements that interfered with the portrait of grace that the lady musician was to emanate" (1995, p, 118). Importantly, the acoustic instrument played during the period was unenhanced by technology and often used to accompany the performer when she sang[2].

Bayton further theorizes that a woman's performance on the electric guitar breaks significant gender codes (1997, pp. 37–40)[3], a perspective supported by other researchers who have examined the role of the electric guitar as a cultural signifier during the twentieth century[4]. Perhaps most notably, Steve Waksman, in an exploration of the historical and cultural significance of the electric guitar, unpacks the "varieties of masculinity" (2001, p. 5) that developed around the instrument, through the hands of players such as Charlie Christian, Jimmy Hendrix and Jimmy Page. While Waksman skilfully and insightfully explores the spectrum of masculine representation that the electric guitar affords male players, he too identifies the significant "male bias" (Waksman, 2001, p. 5) of the instrument.

The Pioneers

Prior to the 1950s, a number of innovative and influential female lead players are identifiable within many sub-genres of early popular music. Noticeably, this is the period that precedes the electric guitars rise to a "position of relative supremacy in the instrumental hierarchy of pop music" (Waksman, 2001, p. 116). Maybelle Carter (1909–1978), one of the first and most important female guitar innovators in American popular music, was a member one of the earliest commercially successful country music recording groups. Central to Carter's legacy is her development of a then-unique playing style, known as the 'Carter Scratch', which has become one of the most widely imitated styles in popular music and is the basis for the country guitar sound. Memphis Minnie (1897–1973) and Sister Rosetta Tharpe (1915–1973) each gained significant commercial success as lead guitar players during the 1930s and 40s in the blues and gospel/R&B genres respectively. Jazz guitarist Mary Osborne (1921–1992) can be heard playing virtuosic lead breaks on major label recordings during the 1940s for artists such as Coleman Hawkins, Mary Lou Williams and Billie Holliday. Another figure of interest from the early 1950s, Mary Ford (1924-1977), was one half of the Les Paul and Mary Ford duo, one of the most successful recording groups "in the years immediately preceding the rise of rock n' roll" (Waksman, 2001, p. 37). The duo released sixteen top-ten hits during the early 1950s, on which Ford was featured primarily as a singer.

The few recordings that do showcase Mary Ford playing lead demonstrate her to be a highly capable player, however she almost exclusively assumed the more acceptable role of singer and rhythm guitarist in capitulation to Les Paul's dominant role of lead guitarist[5].

To Disappear...

While it is clear that highly skilled and innovative female lead players were able to gain commercial success in almost every genre of popular music before the explosion of rock n' roll during the mid 50s, this is starkly contrasted by an almost total absence of equivalent figures during the late 50s and 60s. During this period, the overt "masculinist traditions" (Leonard, 2007, p. 39) of rock and its sub-genres excluded women from positions of creativity across the popular music industry. At almost every level, from control and production to performance, rock became "essentialised as a male form" (ibid., p. 24). During the 1960s, guitar players became increasingly reliant on the use of technology, which by the mid 20th century had itself "become firmly linked to the male" (Oldenziel, 1999, p. 182). The incorporation of effects boxes and more powerful means of amplification became an integral part of a lead player's sound, only further masculinizing the territory. Simultaneously, a drive towards more sexualized performance styles and displays of showmanship further marginalized female players. Male players increasingly incorporated the guitar as an extension of their bodies, utilizing the instrument as a "technophallus" (Waksman, 2001, p. 244). At this juncture, women within the field became faced with "the problems of conferring a female identity upon an arguably phallic instrument" (Whitely, 1997, p. xix), and it became necessary to negotiate the ramifications of this if they were to perform in the style of their male counterparts. Without conforming to newly established hyper-masculine and sexualized performance norms, female players would appear inauthentic. Yet when conforming, they may appear too transgressive, finding themselves in the problematic position of interrupting and disrupting "patriarchal definitions of femininity" (Green, 1997, p. 80).

While there are other aspects to the complexities of gender negotiation faced by female performers during the vital period of innovation in popular music during the 50s and 1960s, it is certainly evident that excessive connotations of masculinity ascribed to the electric guitar and its players, increasingly sexualised performative norms and the exclusionary politics of rock pushed women ever further into the peripheries of an already tenuous position and established tropes of authenticity which female players continue to navigate to this day.

...And then Reappear

In partial response to the overt male domination of rock, the emergence of all-female bands in both the rock and punk genres during the 1970s was significant in providing a forum in which female lead guitarists were able to (re)establish themselves; demonstrated by players such as Lita Ford of The Runaways and Poison Ivy of The Cramps. While the all-female band is a common medium in which female lead guitarists can be located from the 1970s onwards, the format problematically perpetuated a type of gender segregation, re-enforcing the historical concept of female musicians (especially within a unified group) as a novelty, gimmick or spectacle[6]. While the punk movement of the 1970s challenged the traditional, masculine subjectivity of rock, and importantly “provided a space for women to fully participate in a rock discourse” (O’Meara, 2003, p. 300), it also eschewed technical virtuosity and privileged non-standard approaches to playing, which only continued to negatively reinforce the position of the female guitar player as ‘other’ or ‘alternative’ in relation to the figure of the virtuosic, authentic guitar god[7].

Although problematic in ways, the emergence of the all-female rock band and punk rock’s inclusivity of women during the 1970s importantly paved the way for the commercial mainstreaming of all-female bands such as The Go-Go’s and The Bangles during the 1980s. Lead players such as Charlotte Caffey and Vicky Peterson were competent players, and certainly transgressive with respect to their position in the industry, and their presence attests to another level of increased visibility for female lead guitarists within the commercial mainstream. During the 1990s, some significantly innovative ensembles were formed within the Riot Grrrl scene. This social and musical movement effectively extended the DIY punk ethos and was unified in ways with the grunge scene of the early 90s in its reaction to hard rock and heavy metal’s overtly masculine and misogynistic ethos. The movement “sought to establish women’s equality within masculine musical spheres” (Taylor, 2012, p.155) and enabled female musicians to gain further commercial recognition. The Riot-Grrrl scene inspired musical development in many innovative ways, exemplified by the band Sleater-Kinney, whose trio line-up consists of two guitarists, one drummer and no bass player. Similar to the negotiations of Maybelle Carter, who developed her integrated rhythm/lead guitar style out of necessity, Sleater-Kinney’s Corrine Tucker and Carrie Brownstein crafted a self-sufficient and nuanced two-guitar ensemble style, with the two guitarists effectively functioning as lead, rhythm and bass player. An examination of another artist from this same period who developed autonomously, yet from the similar DIY ethic of the Riot-Grrrl movement is Ani DiFranco. In an analysis of DiFranco’s compositional style, which is built around her guitar approach, musicologist Charles Garrett suggests the necessity of

establishing an "alternative model of instrumental virtuosity"(2008, p.381) in order to fully conceptualise her idiolect.

Clearly, much of this examination of the roles and approaches of female lead guitarists has been based on an assessment of players within and against a framework of a fundamentally binary and masculinised narrative, which can be considered problematic. However, the location and assessment of women within the canon in a purely comparative manner is also possible. Lead guitarists Jennifer Batten and Orianthi both pursued similar routes of skill development and training, gaining significant career success during the 80s, 90s and 2000s as touring guitarists for artists such as Jeff Beck, Alice Cooper and Carrie Underwood. Both Batten and Orianthi, highly competent players in their own right, gained perhaps their most significant commercial recognition as touring guitarists for Michael Jackson[8].

Available footage of these guitarists playing the iconic 'Beat It' solo from Michael Jackson's 1983 platinum-selling record (originally played by Eddie Van Halen at the request of producer Quincy Jones) allows for a compelling comparative analysis. At the time of the original recording, Eddie Van Halen was perhaps one of the most recognizable lead guitarists in the world, due in large part to his innovation and mainstreaming of a virtuosic two-handed tapping technique. A comparison of the solo performed by Van Halen, Batten and Orianthi primarily supports a theory that male and female players are capable of an equal level of technical ability. While each version shows certain nuances, they are all robust representations of virtuosic guitar solos. This analysis also supports the theory that commercially successful female lead guitar players can assume autonomous roles, both musically and socio-culturally, yet also highlights some of the impediments faced by contemporary female players. In one performance video, Michael Jackson crouches down, and holds Jennifer Batten's inner thigh while she plays her featured solo, simultaneously sexualising her stage persona, and asserting his dominance over her and the technology that she has clearly mastered. Batten herself described touring all over the world and being constantly asked whether she was a man or a women, stating that "just because I played the guitar, they assumed I was a guy" (Millard, 2004, p. 193)[9].

Gendered Modes of Guitar Performance

The experiences of Jennifer Batten further exemplify issues surrounding gender display and performativity, as well as conformity and disruption of established performance norms. Even with an increased level of inclusion and visibility since the 1990s, women in the field still face a complex negotiation of performance norms verses gender expectations. Optimistically, with

the advent of YouTube and the immediate access to and influence of many styles and modes of performance, developing guitarists are now exposed to a myriad of approaches that both conform to pre-established masculinized norms, but also many alternative modes of performance demonstrated by both mainstream and non-mainstream players[10]. Annie Clark, who performs under the name St. Vincent, is one such example. As a lead guitarist and songwriter, Clark has achieved both critical acclaim and commercial success, demonstrating a lead guitar approach built around creative riffs and lead lines, and highly processed timbres. Collaborating and touring with a mixed gender band, Clark frequently relies on a choreographed and stylized automaton-like stage persona and routine, literally synchronized with her female rhythm guitarist/synth player Toko Yasuda. While at times Clark engages in the historically normative posturing of a lead guitar player, she sometimes draws on a robotic, asexual command of the stage, circumventing any type of traditional gender or sexualized display, simultaneously forging new gendered associations with historical modes of performance[11].

Gendered Modes of Guitar Creativity

To further interrogate the argument that there are no "physical reasons for a lack of female guitarists" (Bayton, 1997, p.39), at least commercially successful ones, the possibility of specifically gendered approaches to creativity and idiolect development may be worthy of further consideration. Eva Rieger has asserted that "sex role is one of the most important determinants of human behavior", and therefore it would seem logical to consider "whether gender influences music", at the level of production, performance and reception (1992, p. 1415). Rieger identified a number of aesthetic approaches and characteristics seen as fundamentally, but not exclusively, attributable to female musicians. One is a theory of restricted aesthetics, which she defined as the ability to create a "maximum amount out of a minimum of material" (ibid., p. 1417). This theory intersects with Pauline Oliveros' research on improvisatory practices amongst women in which she identifies "less emphasis on technical mastery and more concern for sounds weaving into shared textures" (2004, p. 55). Kelley Deal, the lead guitarist for the alternative rock band The Breeders, demonstrates an engagement with this framework in practice. In a discussion of her creation of the main riff from her bands top 40 hit, 'Cannonball', Deal describes using a minimal amount of melodic material to create the riff, intentionally leaving "plenty of holes open for people to have a [musical] conversation" (Deal, 2014). Deal's approach, as well as the theories of Rieger and Oliveros also support the noted predominance of lead guitarists located in all-female ensembles.

While Rieger does not try to prove that "women compose [or play] differently" than their male counterparts (1992, p. 1416), she does argue for a reconsideration and possible redefinition of tradition, which is still certainly applicable to the lead guitar field. While it could be (and has been) argued that these type of analysis reinforce alternate forms of gender stereotyping, it is perhaps important to maintain the perspective of musicologist Marcia Citron, who states that "ignoring received paradigms, even if rejected in principle [...], can lessen our effectiveness in bringing about meaningful change" (1994, p. 18).

Conclusion

While the gender balance has certainly shifted over the past decades, many areas of the popular music industry, including instrumental performance, are still masculine domains, which fundamentally informs the issues discussed in this article. However, the aim here has been to locate and contextualize the position of female lead guitarists who have been able to gain commercial success in pop music during the last century, and to consider their approaches and negotiations of issues of gender and marginalization within the field. This research supports an ongoing project on the close analysis of the musical and technical approaches to playing taken by some of the pioneering female players^[12] mentioned in this article and could certainly be furthered through closer examination of other immediately relevant guitar players such as Danielle Haim of the all-female band Haim, or Bibi McGill, the lead guitarist and music director for Beyoncé's all-female touring band. Importantly, a continued dialogue and further understanding of the issues surrounding the gender imbalance within popular music is vital in order to continue to redress the balance, and support the apparent, yet "slow revolution" (Dawe, 2010, p.139), of gender within this particular field.

Endnotes

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- 1 A number of media article have recently focused on gender imbalance amongst headliners at major international music festivals, including Barnes (2016), Moskovitch (2015) and Thorpe (2015).
 - 2 Lucy Green defines the role of singer as the primarily acceptable role for female musicians throughout history (Green, 1997) a familiar trope within popular music during the 20th century.
 - 3 Importantly, Bayton invokes Judith Butler, stating "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time [...] through a stylised repetition of acts", further asserting that "playing electric guitar jeopardizes" the maintenance of this gender identity (1997, p. 40).
 - 4 See Waksman (2001), Strohm (2004) and Millard (2004).
 - 5 For further information on the playing style of these women, see Lewis (2014).
 - 6 See Bayton (1998, p. 18), Strohm (2004, p. 18), and McGee (2008).
 - 7 See Gottlieb and Wald (2006) for further discussion of the negotiations of gender in punk and rock.
 - 8 Jennifer Batten played on Michael Jackson's 'Bad' (1987–1989), '*Dangerous*' (1992) and '*HIStory*' (1996–1997) world tours. Orianthi was hired as lead guitarist for Jackson's "This Is It" residency at the 02 Arena in London, and commenced rehearsals with Jackson prior to his death in June 2009.
 - 9 Video of Jennifer Batten and Orianthi playing the 'Beat It' solo with Michael Jackson can be seen here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KoVoUYeOf5g> (accessed 10 April 2016) and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3C-xpkyK_o (accessed 10 April 2016).
 - 10 Of note here is the recent explosion in popularity of the percussive fingerstyle genre. This instrumental style combines rhythm, lead and percussion on the acoustic guitar and demands a high level of skill and musicianship in order to present a compelling performance. As that genre has come of age with new media, such as YouTube, the visibility of female players as innovators (such as Kaki King) and ambassadors of the style is promising.
 - 11 Footage of a representative St. Vincent performance can be viewed online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1d9DsEP_BF4 (accessed 10, April, 2016).
 - 12 The author of this article is currently completing PhD research on the idiolect and influence of Maybelle Carter, Memphis Minnie, Rosetta Tharpe and Mary Osborne at the University of Surrey's International Guitar Research Centre.

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